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from
Christmas, 1889.
W.R.P.*

HALID:

AN EASTERN POEM.

BY

WILLIAM R. THAYER.

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HALID.

*A Tale told by a Strange Man, at the Tombs of the Khalifs, near Cairo,
January 24, 1887.*

“I am Halid of Mosûl, the man unpermitted to die.
Do you start? would you laugh? do you peer for the madman’s flash in my eye?
Nay—that is pity, not fear nor contempt that has soften’d your cheek;
I am dumb to the heartless who mock, to the ears of compassion I speak.
I was born in the valley the Tigris loves, in the reign of Harûn,
When the land was fragrant with poets’ breath, and the crescent moon
Rose out of Indus and sank in the waves of the Western Sea,
And never a man that it warm’d but bow’d unto Allah the knee.
In the smile of the gracious Khalif we throve; our zenith was then
When the brave with the scimeter wrought for fame and the wise with the pen!
I was young, I was proud, and I lov’d—ah, better for me had I died!
Have you felt the first, soft dovelike kiss from the lips of a bride?
Have you seen the roses of Shiraz ablush at the waving of spring?
In the almond-groves of Bushire have you heard the bulbul sing?
Have you tasted the honey of Ramleh’s bees?—But you never can know
The beauty of Leila, my bride who vanish’d long ages ago!
Lilies are fair and white, and fragrant is spikenard prest,
But oh! the lilies, and oh! the spice in that garden, her breast!

“One morn I arose and went to the mosque my devotions to pay—
Had not Allah been kind beyond thanking, to me?—I met on the way
Hassan, the friend of my youth, my brother, my comrade in joy,
With the strength of a man, and a seraph’s face, and the mirth of a boy;
He, too, newly-wedded, still glow’d at the thought of his Fatina’s kiss,
And we talk’d as we went, as lovers will talk, of our brides and our bliss.
But just at the door of the mosque, the words on his lips half-said,
Without warning or sigh on the cruel step my Hassan fell dead.
‘A sudden snap of the chords of a heart unus’d to the strain

Of the music of Love,' quoth a leech; 'joy killeth as surely as pain.'
 My Paradise pass'd like a mist, I was scorched by the fires of Hell,
 And they dried the torrent of grief that had gush'd from my lids when he fell.

"I had come to the mosque to give thanks, from its threshold I turn'd me in wrath
 And wander'd, it reck'd me not whither, for demons beleaguer'd my path.
 First Love bewilder'd would cry for his friend, then Anger would smite,
 And I long'd to avenge on the Angel of Death his coward despite;
 Then I mus'd, 'What a pitiful world is this! what profits our life,
 When neither our Joy nor our Love is shielded from Azrael's knife?
 To Allah we pray as our God, Almighty, we call Him, and just,—
 Was it righteous to stifle the lips of my friend with a handful of dust?
 If Joy be the heavenly guerdon that God on the faithful bestows
 Why smites He the happy on earth? If His power no obstacle knows
 Why leaves He the youthful and good to be slain, and the wicked to flee?
 Why spares He the old over-ripe? Is Death more mighty than He?
 Then Death will I worship, not impotent Allah, and him will implore
 To forget for awhile that I live, and to pass unenter'd my door.'

"Thus darkling I sought my abode, and Leila I drew to my breast;
 My fingers tenderly stray'd in her hair, and her cheeks I caress'd,
 But joy did not wake at the touch, there was gall in her kisses sweet,
 For I heard a voice in my heart, 'Her bosom may cease to beat—
 'The bride you enfold in your arms, at a twinkling may turn to clay—
 'Ere you smooth her tresses again, yourself may be summon'd away!
 'Fool! life and delight are not yours, but the plaything of whimsical Death;
 'The Palace of Love where you dwell is a bubble to burst at a breath!
 So I liv'd as a stranger to joy, tho' the trappings of joy were mine:
 When wormwood embitters the tongue, what savor hath honey, or wine?
 And over the world there lower'd a pall, as at an eclipse,
 And I heard only dirges in song, and wails upon laughing lips.
 Wherever I walk'd there lengthen'd before me the shadow black
 Of the wings of the Angel of Death, and I fear'd to turn and look back,
 Out of dread for his terrible face, and his arm uplifted to slay:

Then I cried for the day by night, and I long'd for the night by day.
 If I gaz'd at the herons in flight, or paus'd by the Tigris' side,
 The thought burnt into my soul, 'While you watch, an hour has died';
 And it seem'd that Canopus had wings, and the fickle moon and the sun
 Were eager to hasten the time when my wretched race should be run.

"So I hated my life, yet I shrank from Death, till at last in despair,
 I humbled my brow in the dust, and pray'd unto Allah this prayer:
 'O God, if it be that Thou deignest to harken when mortals beseech—
 'If the Earth be Thine, and the souls therein—if Thy power can reach
 'To the depth of our need—if pity be Thine—I entreat Thee to hear!
 'The world was bright, and my bride I lov'd, and my friend was dear—
 'Was it wrong to delight in Thy gifts? Dost thou bid us Thy bounty despise?
 'If Beauty is not to be seen, O Lord, why give us these eyes?
 'But when Death holds the goblet of Life to our lips the vintage is sour;
 'Beauty and pleasure, and love itself cannot charm us an hour
 'If we fear they will fade like mirage—that a breath may destroy;
 'On the eddies of Change and the sands of Doubt we can build not our Joy.
 'Daily I offer'd Thee fivefold thanks, I believ'd Thee loving and just,
 'Till the hand of my friend was frozen in mine: then my hope and my trust
 'Were undone, and I said in my impious wrath that Allah allows
 'Eblis and Death to wanton at will in His earthly house,
 'While He in Paradiſe dwelleth apart, contented to hear
 'The praise which the angels who fell not in sin attune to His ear.
 'But Lord, if Thou lovest a human soul, and wouldst silence the shout
 'Of Thine arrogant foes, I implore thou wilt deign to cleanse me from doubt.
 'What wonder, what wonder Thy Prophets of old to worship were stirr'd,
 'Since Thy face uncurtain'd they saw, and Thy voice unmuffled they heard?
 'Can we know that their faith had prevail'd were it not for Thy miracles' aid?
 'O now is the time, and I am the man for a sign to persuade!
 If Thy strength, as our fathers declar'd, be supreme, oh show me a sign,
 Shed but a drop of Thy mercy on me, and my zeal shall be Thine;
 Thee as my God I will own, as the Lord of the Earth and the sky,
 If Thou answer the pray'r I now offer—oh grant that I never may die!"

"So I pray'd like to one full of doubts if there be any virtue in pray'r,
 And would fledge with the feathers of scorn the appeals he shoots in despair.
 But sleep made a truce with my grief, and down to my bedside came
 The Angel of Revelation, with scrolls and a sword of flame :
 And he opened the scrolls, and spake, 'Behold the book of thy fate,
 'Where thy deeds were written before thy birth ; behold the date
 'Appointed for thee to depart—after three-score years and one ;
 'On the eve of the fast of Ramadan thy records are done.'
 Then I fain had seen whether further bliss to my life was decreed,
 But the book was written in heavenly script, which no mortal may read.
 And the Angel said, 'Thy doom was this till thou madest a cry,
 'For a sign that Allah is Lord ; He grants that thou shalt not die.'
 Thus speaking he burnt the scroll of my fate, and I strove to embrace
 His knees, for none might bear to look on his radiant face ;
 But he vanish'd like music still'd. In the morning when I awoke
 The stone had roll'd from my heart, and my neck had slipp'd its yoke.

"As when a traveller bound for Fez from his route doth stray,
 And the hot Harmattan blows, and feverish calentures play
 In his dizzy brain, and he loses hope and wishes to die,
 Until from the crest of a billow of sand he can feebly descry
 In the hollow beneath a cluster of trees and his caravan,
 And he shouts to his friends, and is sav'd : so the rapture of living ran
 Again thro' my soul when I woke that morn and saw by my side
 My Lily of Shiraz asleep, Leila, my beautiful bride !
 And I kiss'd her lids, and whisper'd, 'Awake, the demon has fled !
 'And Love is the Sultan again !' Oh the tears of joy she shed !

"Exulting I greeted the sun, and I felt no longer the curse
 Of being a bubble of Time in a timeless universe.
 Unsadden'd, I watch'd the Tigris flow and the Galaxy shine—
 Let them rush on their race forever, the length of their race was mine !
 Beauty could never outlive me, and Joy could never exceed
 The scope of my life ; I could look without shame on a moth or a weed.

So the years flew by, but I reck'd not; my life had the amplitude
 Of the ocean which waits for its streams. Men weep over bygone good :
 The pleasures that hover'd but once within grasp, and unseiz'd flew away
 Had the loveliest plumage; how dull and common the pleasures that stay !
 But I was absolv'd from the demon Regret, which soundeth a knell
 When the goblets clink at the feast of delight, and whispers farewell ;
 That presage of parting that darkens the spirits of friends who meet
 Cast not its shadow on me—my sweet was a permanent sweet.
 I leisurely grew to the stature and strength of a dignified man,
 Who summons not Haste to complete the building which Wisdom began,
 But layeth his courses with care, and leaveth no crevice for Time :
 And before I would venture to fly, I patiently taught me to climb.
 I had wealth enough in my purse, and children play'd in my house,
 And Suhreh's face had delighted me less than the face of my spouse.
 I drank of the poet's wine, I tasted the bread of the sage ;
 I fear'd no more lest a hand unseen, ere I finish'd the page,
 Should close the book ; and I smil'd, when my neighbors with trembling breath
 Lamented that life is brief, and utter'd their horror of death.
 The rose-trees bloom'd in my garden, my branches hung low with fruit ;
 I serv'd the Khalif as vizier, and mighty was my repute.
 My vow unto Allah I kept—not a monk of the sky-blue frock
 More zealously wafted his incense of praise, but I seal'd with the lock
 Of silence my lips concerning the Angel's visit to me
 And I dar'd not to whisper to Leila herself of that solemn decree.

"So the current of life ran eagerly down from the mountainous steep
 Which sends youth forth at a passionate speed, till, placid and deep,
 It flows with the gait of a King thro' the plain of our middle years,
 And seemeth almost to pause at times, as the ocean it nears.
 Like a banyan my roots struck far in the earth, and my branches wide
 Renew'd their strength in the earth again, and on every side
 Put forth new shoots—from a single seed an acre of shade !
 And round the knees of the parent my children's children play'd.
 Then the time approach'd when the Angel announced I was fated to die ;

Before that doom had been cancel'd. My terror returned, and I
 Fell to doubting again whether Allah would hold to pledge or relent.
 On the evening which usher'd the Ramadan fast, to the housetop I went
 And trembling I saw the infant moon sink into her cradle of flowers,
 And the stars grow bright, and the city asleep. Alone, I counted the hours
 Whose march was slow as the step of those who follow a bier;
 Thus I sat and watch'd in the tomb of Night, with my comrade, Fear.
 What if Time should halt?—But no! for I saw on a minaret's tip
 Aldébaran like a ruby aflame, then leisurely slip
 Into the black horizon's bowl, and slowly the Pleiades
 Dropt like dew from bough to bough of the cinnamon-trees.
 Then I fix'd my eyes on the East, where the beacon of succor should burn:
 Still dark! Not a glimmer of grey! Not a petal of rose to discern!
 I strove to sort the crow-black thread from the thread that was white—
 In vain, for they both were black. Then, sudden, a dapple of light,
 Faint as the pallor a young swan casts at dusk on a stream,
 Crept into the sky and a little bedimm'd the stars; then a gleam,
 And the rim of the earth was distinct from the sky; the cheeks of the mist
 Flutter'd a delicate pink, as a damsel blushes when kiss'd;
 Then diaphanous sapphire tinted the East, and over the crest
 Of the loftiest peak spread the tender hues of pearl in the West!
 I could count the veins on my hand; the horizon's raven shrouds
 Were dyed with purple and hemm'd with gold, and anon the clouds
 Were changed to a garden of flowers, more gorgeous than Shiraz knows—
 Tulips of wonderful hues, and heavenly bowers of rose!
 And now like the gilded dome of a mosque was the glow in the East,
 And into the Temple of Day ascended the Great High Priest,
 While the breeze shook incense out, and the songsters jubilee made:
 Allah had granted my prayer—I liv'd, and was not afraid!

"For a season or more, like a thirsty man, my pleasures I quaff'd.
 'Time overlooks the Vizier, the Khalif remark'd, and I laugh'd;
 'Nay, Sire, a Tortoise is Time, and we are the Hares,' I replied;
 'Tho' he seem to delay, ere the goal he will conquer our fleetfoot pride.'

Those were the words on my tongue, but the thoughts I kept in my heart
 Had an arrogant ring: 'Halid shall stay, but thou shalt depart,
 'In spite of thy power, O King; the servant shall bury his lord.'
 O man, never dare to exult, for the swift, invisible sword
 Spareth the brow in the dust, but smiteth the insolent head!
 Leila, the life of my life, fell sick—ere a month she was dead.
 At her grave with ashes I crown'd me, and wept; then, awful there burst
 On my soul a storm of despair which thunder'd, *Thou, wretch, art accurs'd!*
 Unrighteous the boon I had ask'd, and Allah had granted me life—
 But Love, the enricher of all, lay dead in the grave of my wife.
 Had I pray'd that she might be deathless with me, would Allah have heard?
 Too late, she was gone, and forever! *forever*—the terrible word,
 The whisper sent back from the Past, the echo of Fate and Regret,
 The warning that unto the strut of our Pride, a limit is set!
 Not at once could I master its meaning—my grief was too stormy for that!
 But slowly, as day after day the Sun in his palace sat,
 Yet shone not upon her return; and as in the usual hum
 Of familiar household voices, her voice, the sweetest, was dumb;
 And as I listen'd at Night for the sound of her step in my room,
 Yet the pitiless silence was never disturb'd—then I measured my doom!
 Think you the world has compassion? It hurried on just as before:
 Men went to their toil or their revel, and children play'd at my door;
 The nightingales sang just as sweetly, the rose-trees blossom'd as red,
 As if unaware that my joy had set, that my darling was dead!
 And the months on her grave the cyclamen strew'd and anemonies bright—
 As if 'twere a spot where lovers might come to take their delight.

"My kindred entreated me kindly at first, and strove to console,
 And the good Khalif us'd to mingle his words of cheer with my dole.
 'Be not dejected, Halid: thou art wise, and the Sages have taught
 'That the sorrows and fears which beset us on earth shall vanish—that naught
 'Which we suffer below shall endure—that even grief has an end,
 'If we hark for the rustle of Azrael's wings, for he is our friend,
 'And hastens to rescue. Like pilgrims, thro' life we wander a while,

'And are lur'd from our path by its beauty; its pleasures beguile,
 'We will travel no farther; our heaven is here, and here we will stop:
 'So we tent by the pool of delight, but our thirst is unslak'd; and then drop
 'The illusions! The world thro' our fingers glides, like rain thro' a sieve,
 'And nothing abides—all is dream! here no permanent pleasure can live!
 'So we learn from the eddies and toss of this vehement earthly tide
 'To hope for a heavenly shore where we shall forever abide.
 'And we who have journey'd the farthest in life stand nearest the gate
 'Where infinite joy, and the loves we have lost, our coming await.'
 I groan'd at the stab of his comforting words, yet I dar'd not reveal
 My hideous secret; no balsam of hope my spirit could heal.
 But as when a rower refrains from his oars the slender caïque
 Still glideth ahead, but with lessening speed, so a man, when weak
 From affliction, by habit performs, what erst he did by his will;
 Joyless I wrought as before, impell'd by life's impetus still.
 Then the good King died and my friends were muffled up one by one,
 Like the moon and the stars when over the sky a tempest is blown,
 And I remain'd in the dark. Woe, woe to the desolate sire,
 Who lags too long in the seat to which his children aspire!
 Their wish they dissembled at first, but I knew from their loveless eye
 That they chaf'd at my weary delay, and secretly hop'd I would die.
 Not love, but an irksome duty, directed their conduct to me;
 Not a single caress was unreckon'd, no word, no courtesy free.
 When I spoke they restlessly listen'd, and said in contempt, 'What you say
 'May once have been wise, but Wisdom has alter'd its fashion to-day;
 'The world is the prize of the young, whose motives you cannot know;
 'Sit you by the hearth; let us act; we tire of your long-ago.'
 And sometimes I heard them disputing what age a man may attain:
 One cited that Noah was the oldest; 'But,' answer'd another, 'tis plain
 'The measure we use for the Prophets cannot be us'd for us all;
 'In the youth of the world there were giants, but men are now puny and small.
 'Already Halid has exceeded the mean; methinks it is strange,
 'That in spite of his burden of years, his countenance showeth no change.'

"Ah, ready are we to evade the duty we ought to endure!
 At morn we surmise, and at noon we suspect, and by night we are sure!
 A hint shall attain the unspotted when jealousy holds the assize,
 And evil desire soon finds an excuse that testifies.
 My kinsfolk threw over deceit ere long. 'We bid thee reveal,'
 Quoth one, and his features were ice, 'how it happens that Time cannot steal
 'A jot from the speed of thy life.' Then another, with voice more stern,
 'Grievous indeed at the best, is an old man's fretful sojourn:
 'But Nature has ruth for his heirs and for him, and calls him away.
 'What truce hast thou bargain'd with her that she grants this weary delay?'
 I was mute, but no doubt had I spoken their anger had found in my speech,
 As it found in my silence a ready offense to blame and impeach.
 'Now mark ye, 'tis as I suspected,' said one, 'he dares not deny
 'That a devil possesses his soul—that he has a djin for ally!'
 'Yea, and yet blacker than that!' cried another, 'the Prophet declares
 'That when Eblis strides forth to his harvest, the shape of a mortal he wears;
 'Our sire Halid went to Heaven long since; this creature we see,
 'Disguis'd in his form, is the Devil.' 'Or else,' quoth a third, 'it ma be
 'That the soul of Halid is ensnar'd in a secret and pardonless crime,
 'And Allah ordains for his sin that he be not deliver'd by Time.'
 So near struck the guess to the mark that I shudder'd, but still I was mute.
 'With merely a word or a look, the innocent quickly refute
 'The charges that rest not on truth,' the eldest then taunted, 'but thou
 'Art ashamed to confide in thy sons; thy guiltiness lowers thy brow.
 'Be he wicked or wizard, my brothers, 'tis surely unlawful to give
 'Our shelter to him any longer! The good with the bad should not live,
 'For sinful example will subtly envenom the virtuous heart.
 'Our souls we must guard from contagion: to-day this man must depart.'
 Ah, never is wanting the plea of religion to justify wrong!
 In vain shall the righteous appeal when a text emboldens the strong!
 'We do but the will of the Prophet!' my children exclaim'd; 'Away!'
 'Ye follow your wicked desires—I go—but the Lord will repay'—
 Flashed my tongue ere I sheath'd it in silence again. Then my feet
 Pass'd over the pitiless threshold; alone I groped in the street.

"The Earth lay open before me, but nowhere in it a home—
 No Mecca, no grave, at the end of my journey! Forever to roam,
 That was my fate.—Much I pass, too long were the anguish to tell;
 To speak of hell's agonies calmly, we first must have risen from hell.
 Not a road in the East or the West but my sandals have startled its dust:
 Not a land but has taught me how bitter and hard is an alien's crust,
 And how cruel are men to their fellows; the weak and poor are the grain
 Which the millstones Power and Riches grind, unheeding their pain.
 If I settled perchance in a village, and sought but to follow a trade,
 The townsmen would whisper and doubt, and then they would harshly upbraid,
 And call me a creature unholy, and oust me with insults and blows:
 For those who are not like the many, the many entreat as their foes.
 I counted no longer the days—Time was nothing to me who had all;
 They only a calendar need whose pittance of seasons is small,
 For which a scant measure of glory, or learning, or love, may be bought;
 But I, with the hoard of the Ages to spend could purchase me nought:
 A beggar 'mid riches, like him who starves in a mine of gold.
 Wearily, wearily over my head the indolent centuries roll'd,—
 Ever the brazen sun by day, and by night the languid moon;
 Nature a dullard that mumbles by rote her monotonous tune,
 And waywardly fondles her playthings, then tosses them by, disdain'd;
 Each Spring dismantled by Autumn, no permanent victory gain'd;
 A circuit of vain preparations! Motionless, wearily I
 Like the spike of a dial was fix'd, and saw them wheel sluggishly by!

"Oh God, how I struggled to break from this hideous prison of life!
 How my heart leapt up when I heard of a town where the plague was rife:
 Thither I hurried and tended the sick, but the pestilent air
 Was as Spring-time balm to my nostrils; 'I flourish'd and Death flourish'd there!
 If I plung'd into battle an unseen hand turn'd the arrows aside;
 And the deadliest poison refresh'd me like wine. Thereafter I tried
 The arts forbidden and black of the Magian tribe who explore
 The innermost bowels of life; I studied the alchemist's lore;
 I grop'd in the sorcerers' caves,—in vain! They are cheats who pretend

To discover the process by which the dust and the spirit blend!
 We are, but wherefore, or how, that only Allah can show:
 Think you a wizard His equal, and what He hideth can know?
 What Allah refuses to Faith we cannot unravel by Wit:
 So I dropt the impossible quest, and learn'd perforce to submit.

“I watch'd like Simurga the ebb and flow of the Fate of Man—
 Wearisome currents, profitless tides, who knoweth your plan?
 Nations burst into blossom and fill'd the world with their scent—
 Then a sudden frost or a wind, and they shrivell'd and perish'd forespent.
 I knew when I quitted a proud-built town that when I came back
 I should find a forest above it, or sand, and the lizards' track.
 In the palace of Jamshyd the Great, I have heard the jackals howl;
 The bats have made them a perch in his mosque: the hyaenas prowl
 Thro' the courts of mighty Karûn; Palmyra's a desert again:
 Men build, but the spiders which build not, inherit the glory of men.
 The creeds are but as simoons, which blow from the East or the West,
 And the nations are rushes which bend, but their roots unshaken rest:
 The wind from Medina has veer'd, and freshens from Galilee;
 The blood of the Saracen weakens, the Giaour is stronger than he—
 But the Frank shall not lord it forever, another victor shall rise
 To call him ancient, and spurn his faith and his wisdom as lies.
 For only ALLAH abides! Mohammed, and Jesus, and Budh,
 Are the names men use to draw near to the nameless Infinitude,
 And be not destroy'd; of these they can reason, to these they can pray,—
 But others diviner shall come, and the worship of these shall decay,
 Till the Vision approach to the Truth, but That men never shall see:
 If a man be mistaken for God, ah, what must God's majesty be!
 I think of the time when Allah shall tire of our mortal show,
 And winnow the race from the Earth, but leave me still here below,
 Alone on the whirling ball, unpitied, and doom'd unforgiven
 To drop forever aghast thro' the wildernesses of heaven!

“O you who live with Death at your beck may cherish your life!
 There is balm, there is balm for your pain, and peace at last for your s.

Despair should not master the heart of a mortal permitted to die—
 His grief hath a bourne, he may laugh at the threats of disaster, but I
 And my pangs are eternal. Behold, the very Pyramids there
 Have crumbled an inch since I saw them last, and the ages shall wear
 Their pride to the floor of the desert, to drift about in the wind;
 And men shall come to behold them, and never a vestige find,
 And scholars shall doubt their existence, and some shall boldly maintain,
 'Tis only an ancient story, to dazzle posterity's brain!
 Yet then—when the stones have wasted, my life as to-day will be,
 For my agony always begins, and there is no Past for me.
 Look at that beetle which crawls at our feet—ah, he shall have Death—
 While I—though a man—can never escape from the burden of breath!
 The curtain which hangs like a pall in front of my hopeless eyes
 Shall be lifted for all save me—they shall pass into Paradise,
 Where the odors of blooming tuba-trees thro' the gardens steal:
 Hassan and Leila are there, and they drink of the Selsebil:
 And no recollection of me perturbs their heavenly mirth,
 For Heaven would less be Heaven, if the thought of friends on Earth,
 Who suffer still in the flesh, the blissful air could chill:
 So they drink of the fount of Delight, and are bless'd with the Angel's will.
 But I, forgotten of all save Woe, can never forget;
 When I look behind, 'tis Remorse—when I look around 'tis Regret.
 The rivets of destiny bind my life to this cliff forlorn—
 I shall never see Leila again! Oh would I had never been born!—
 You have heard my terrible fate: when you pray unto God beware
 Lest you ask an unhallowèd boon, and He curse by granting your prayer!"

As he ceas'd, there pass'd us some boisterous men, and seeing Halid,
 They tapp'd their foreheads, and laugh'd, and shouted to me, 'Would you heed
 The tale of a crazy beggar?' He heard, and unspeakable woe
 Struggled with wrath on his haggard face: then he turned him to go;
 And ere I could summon him back, or rebuke those insolent men,
 The tombs had shut him from sight, and I saw him never again.

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